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ABSTRACT

One does not teach writing, one learns writing which is to say that the role of the teacher is to help the student learn by actually writing. However, crucial to writing is the preparatory step with which the teacher can help: motivation. That is, students who know why they are writing and to whom they are writing can write with an intensity not otherwise likely. A variety of role-playing tactics can be used in a composition class to help the student prepare to write. An assignment can be made as if the student were writing to his or her immediate supervisor justifying the existence of his or her job within a company. The student may pretend to be composing a mailer to a disinterested person asking that person for funds for a charitable society or to resubscribe to a magazine. He or she may pretend to be a politician defending a position, or a teacher recommending one textbook over another, or an applicant writing a personal statement to a personnel director, or any of a number of other roles which require some awareness of the motive of the writer and of the concern of the audience. This role-playing helps the student by creating that most important of all writing components, motivation. (TJ)

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The Only "Pre-Writing" That Counts - Motivation

Laurence Behrens

We often tell our students that it's difficult for them to be objective about their own work, that it's a good idea to let other people look it over and offer their impressions before the final version is turned in. It strikes me that this is equally good advice for composition instructors, concerning their own teaching approach. I know that I seldom experienced so many misgivings about the way I used to teach composition as whe I sat in on the classes of other instructors who were teaching it the same way I was (i.e., discussion of anthology selections, handbook exercises, etc.) Usually, these were on occasions when I had to evaluate the instructor's teaching; and one of the main questions in my mind was whether or not a good discussion was going on. It took many hours of fidgeting and glacing at my watch before I concluded that, for the most part, it was quite irrelevant - for a writing class - what kind of a discussion was going on.

Ostensibly, the purpose of these anthology selections and the discussions about them is to provide the students with experiences in "pre-writing" - that is, to give them ideas for papers that they go on to write. But I never saw any evidence that the discussions helped them to develop any ideas that they didn't already have. If anything, I noticed, the observations of well-known writers on some topic (as well as the observations of the rest of the class, including the instructor) did more to intimidate students and to stifle further thought on the matter, by making any "amateur" response pale by comparison. There's no need to belabor this point; many have made it in the past few years (James Moffett, William Coles, E.D. Hirsch, to mention only three); I raise it only to explain how my own observations and experiences helped convince me what others had already discovered: that there's no discernible connection between

the standard, ritualistic discussions - good or bad - that go on in composition classes, and the quality of papers that follow. My experiences have convinced me, on the other hand, that there is only one essential element of "pre-writing" for all writing that is worth reading - namely, motivation: wanting to write something, needing to write something - to somebody.

Definition by illustration: motivation in writing is not when one selects some broad subject area, narrows it down in several successive stages, and then invents some predicate phrase for this whittled-down subject to form a thesis. Motivation in writing is when one feels so strongly about some matter that one has to get it out or burst. These, of course, are two extreme situations; and obviously, not all the material that is written - and that is worth reading - springs from such strong feelings. But it should at least tend in that direction, rather than the other one, which is the direction of bloodless, sterile, academic writing - the kind of work that William Coles justly dubs "Themewriting."

Of course, the fact that a person is highly motivated to write something won't necessarily make his job of writing any easier. Just the opposite, I would think: it's pointless, make-work writing that often flows effortlessly off the pen, since what one ends up saying doesn't really matter; it's getting out the required number of words (prefereably in some coherent and grammatical form) that counts. Highly motivated writing takes enormous quantities of energy; and in order to get people to expend such energy, we have to give them things to write about that strike them as both genuine and as reasonably important. People can't be expected to put themselves to a great deal of effort if they have nothing to say to begin with, or if they have to go through the tedious (and artificial) process of finding something to say, either by narrowing a topic or choosing an argument, or if they're assigned topics that strike them as mechanical or stupid. But when a person has a strong impulse to say something in particular to someone in particular, he will generally do everything in his power to make sure that his meaning gets across clearly and emphatically, without confusing, or boring, or unnecessarily irritating his reader. So the act of fixing up a weak introduction, or an inadequate transition, or incorrect punctuation

becomes a function of this overriding purpose, rather than an end in its own right that the instructor (being an English teacher) requires.

Providing this necessary spark of motivation, this necessary sense of urgency becomes, then, one of the chief obligations I undertake as a teacher of writing. And I try to provide this spark by assigning my students writing problems that are as "real" as possible Now, clearly, "reality" in a writing class is a relative business. By its very nature, the writing class is an artificial environment for stimulating writing. Ultimately, all of the writing is produced because the instructor requires it, not because the student is respondin to some stimulus or set of stimuli from the outside world. Still, there are degrees of artificiality in the world of student writing (the notorious "What I Did This Summer" assignment, for instance, is about as genuine a piece of communication as the euphuistic novel). If the writing class is not actually "life," it can at least approach "life-likeness." Instead of assigning pieces of writing that could be generated only in a composition class (the classic "English Composition we could try to assign pieces that students might see themselves (or someone else) actually composing some day.

To put it another way: when pilots train in a flight simulator, they do not actually fly through the air; when their instructors put them through tricky and dangerous maneuvers, they are not actually in any danger; but they are nevertheless likely to get a better idea of what it feels like to be in danger than they could from any textual or lecture material; and so they are more likely to be motivated to use all the skill and ingenuity at their disposal to figure out the best way of getting themselves out of danger. One way I approach my class, then, is to treat it as a flight simulator: I put my "trainees into the thick of a lifelike situation, and ask them to maneuver their way out of it as skillfully and effectively as possible. (I have not, to be perfectly honest, talked with many flight crews recently; but I'd be willing to bet that they learn more about flying from their flight simulators than from their flight manuals.)

Life-like situations demand from students that they come face to face with human nature as well as with rhetorical categories. Human nature, of course, is somewhat less amenable to pre-teaching than maxims of writing. But since our insight into human nature is

so much a part of the way we devise arguments and the way we respond to them (a fact of which the classical rhetoricians were, of course, deeply aware), it is certainly a factor that deserves to be taken into consideration when we devise and respond to writing situations. A couple of years ago, Richard Ohmann, in his chapter on composition in English in America, made the extremely valuable point that motivation at both ends of the writing situation is far less logical and reasonable and subject to manipulation than can be implied from our textbooks (which might lead one to believe that all disputes are resolvable through sweet reason) - even with their new sections on audience; that significant quantities of irrational (though predictable) self-interest, emotional, economic, social, and otherwise, often drive people to write, as well as drive readers to block out what is being written. For instance, the best and most convincing arguments in the world by aggrieved labor leaders often cut no ice with unsympathetic management. We can't always do a great deal to alleviate this situation, of course (and I certainly don't mean to imply that we should teach our students to argue irrationally or deceptively); but if we're conscious of the problems to communication in this area, we might be able to take different tacks in our writing, and save ourselves a lot of otherwise wasted energy.

One assignment I've found successful for several years now, both for motivating students, and for allowing them to grapple with these hard realities of self-interest, is sparked by a memo I send them all, ostensibly from the vice-president of some company they can see themselves working for in the future. The memo begins with some hemming and hawing by the VP about the adverse effects of the current recession on the company's profit margin, and the consequent need for belt-tightening on everyone's part; but it soon gets down to the matter at hand, which is that a recent in-house efficiency study has revealed that this particular employee's job position can no longer be operationally and/or fiscally justified. This is not a matter of the employee's not doing his or her job well, the VP hastens to add, simply that the job itself is no longer considered essential, and so is being abolished as of August 31 of the current calendar year. Therefore, he goes on, unless the employee can present

good and sufficient reasons why this action should not proceed as planned, the decision will be considered final. The VP concludes by conveying a message from the management of sincere appreciation for past services, and best wishes for success in the future.

The assignment, of course, is to find a set of "good and sufficient reasons why this action should not proceed as planned." The students have already been advised, by means of prefactory and postfactory notes, that they are to imagine that they have just bought an expensive house, with a large mortgage, as well as a second color TV, etc.; that the job market being what it is, finding another job for which their skills qualify them will not be easy; that the vice-president is known to be an unsympathetic fellow, unlikely to be moved by protestations of personal hardship; and that he is skeptical of everyone's claim to corporate value (except his own). Class discussion then begins with the question, how on earth is such an argument to be prepared?

After we consider and reject various ways of approaching the matter, we at some point agree that the only argument that will make much of an impression on these people is one that makes a convincing case for the adverse effects on the company if this particular job is eliminated. Depending on the type of company and the type of job they choose for themselves, some students will emphasize the adverse financial effect, others, the adverse public relations effect. So then the immediate job becomes how to show conclusively, despite the company's in-house study, that the job really is essential. Some students choose to try to discredit the in-house study. Others ignore it, and concentrate on the positive arguments for their job position.

But this is only the beginning. Soon we find it necessary to get into a discussion of tone. How are we going to "sound" in this letter? Of course, the immediate temptation is to sound incredulous, bitter, outraged, if not positively sarcastic. A number of calmer souls in the class usually point out the counterproductiveness of that approach. No, the writer must sound concerned, but quite rational, without any hint of animosity. He or she must come across as being worried about the well-being of the company (without overdoing it, of course), while

being acceptably self-confident about his or her ability to fill the position better than anyone else.

From these basic considerations, others follow. How should the argument be presented? Again, after a short period of discussion, the class generally agrees (without having read so beforehand in the textbook), that the strongest argument should be saved for the end. Transitions are necessary to make sure the arguments remain "single-minded." Correct grammar and punctuation is necessary so that the management won't wonder where this employee went to school, if at all. Every writing strategy and technique the writer selects and uses follows from the basic situation - that a very distressed employee wants desperately to try to hold onto his job.

Now, obviously, all writing situations aren't quite so fraught with anxiety. The point is, however, to get students to write material that seems to them worth writing about, writing that matters, writing for which something other than a grade appears to be at stake. I don't claim that all the responses I get to this assignment are models of persuasive rhetoric; but there's generally a seriousness and intensity of purpose in the weakest of them far beyond what I'd been used to getting in my comp classes.

Basic to the motivated writing assignment is a complete situation: the writer needs to convince a particular person (or persons) of something so that something in particular (if it is nothing else than impressing the prospective reader with the writer's abilities) can be accomplished. Other assignments I've used include:

(a) having students compose a piece of "junk" mail (it's only "junk" to the uninterested reader, of course); that is, assuming the role of a person deeply committed to some cause (the Heart Fund, the Save the Dolphin Society, getting people to re-subscribe to The New Republic, etc.), and composing a letter so convincing (or moving) that people will write out a check;

(b) writing a speech for a mayor or a governor or a President, defending his position or action on some unpopular issue before a particular type of audience (labor, business, farmers, VFW, etc.);

(c) assuming the role of a high school English teacher and writing a letter to the principal in response to a memo asking which

of two composition texts or anthologies that the "teacher" has had experience with, he would recommend;

(d) writing a personal statement to accompany an application to graduate or professional school or for a job, giving some account of the writer's aims, interests, qualifications (the kind of account many of them will actually find themselves writing within a few years);

(e) writing a report for the State Department on the likelihood of revolution occuring within a particular country, based on its recent internal instability;

(f) writing a letter of apology, on behalf of the editor of a newspaper, to the subject of a story who has been embarrassed because the information printed was inaccurate or garbled (an exercise in tone, and often, in how to avoid laughing);

(g) in courses which deal with literary texts, having students assume the role of editors, who write letters to their authors, and who either reject the submitted material (for the reasons given), or make suggestions for revisions or modifications, in accordance with the current tastes and nature of the readership (this exercise, of course, may generate writing that is just as critical of the readership as of the authors).

Even with traditional assignments like the research paper, which often seem impossible to enliven (although see "Researching Old Murders: Creative Term Projects for Freshmen," W. Keith Kraus, in Classroom Practices in Teaching English, 1975-76, NCTE, 1975), one can create a situational context. For the purpose of the research paper, my students are all appointed research staffers at some big "think tank." They must submit a detailed prospectus for their study, explaining not only what is to be done, but also how it is to be done, and why it should be done. The following week, their prospectuses come back to them. Each student is now asked to assume the role of some other, more experienced research staffer at the institute, and he must comment on his own prospectus, as if it were someone else's, by responding to two memos. The first is a brief message from the Director of Research (who he has only seen once and who everyone is terrified of) asking for comment. The second is a longer one, from the Assistant Chief of Projects, a good friend of the student-researcher, who can tell him confidentially that the Director wasn't very happy with the

original prospectus (no reason given, except that it "sounds like something that came out of an English Composition class"), but was more or less interested in going ahead with it - in revised form - because this area represented a weak spot in the company's dossier, and he wanted to help keep up its elegibility for federal funding. The student is then asked to prepare two memos, responding both to the Director and to the Assistant Chief, along with making suggestions for revising the prospectus. The assignment, therefore, is an exercise not only in argument and in tone (which must be adjusted, of course, to suit the addressee), but also in the critical analysis and evaluation of one's own work.

Utilitarian though it may appear on the basis of such assignments, I see my course as humanistic in thrust. It's true that I don't assign my students to read humanistic essays by the best writers. But I do assume that my students are people who want to write messages to other people - and that to do this effectively, they need to know what their own motives are (and by extension, through imaginative role-playing, what the motives of others are), and they need to know what motivates their readers - not necessarily so that they can be manipulative (except in the sense that all writing is manipulative), but so that they can use their knowledge of human nature, as well as their much less intuitive and settled knowledge of language and rhetoric, to make the best possible impression and the strongest impact upon their readers. I give my students as few pre-digested rules and principles as possible, but encourage them rather to use their own knowledge and ingenuity to solve problems as they come up - to fly their way out of them, as it were. I attempt, in sum, to get my students interested in writing not as an academic exercise, but as a strategy, or a set of strategies, to achieve particular goals. And as an encouraging by-product of this, I can usually help them to feel more comfortable about their ability to handle real writing situations. As the Person said, writing can't be taught, but it can be learned. Making students read handbook and anthology selections means teaching writing; making them puzzle out writing problems means learning writing.